Traumatic Procreations: Frankenstein, Heterophobia, and the Fear of (Re)production*

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Monstrous Birth

The central scene in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is that of the creature’s birth, the coming-to-life of the partially-human, larger-than-life composite of body parts robbed from graves, on the one hand, and scientific wizardry flourished by the hubristic Dr. Victor Frankenstein, on the other. Frankenstein’s multitudinous successors—on film and elsewhere—grapple with how to represent the creature’s first movements or actions in Shelley’s early science fiction vision. Despite all the focus on the science of

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creation, however, it turns out that what is “spectacular” in the novel is not the mechanics of imitating life, but rather its emotions, indeed the family drama that is staged upon the creature’s birth. When the creature turns out to be too ugly to look upon, when it asks for a love that Victor rejects, when it returns to demand proper parental care, Mary Shelley reiterates all the complex emotions of parenting and parental responsibility. The creature’s birth encodes a trauma of procreation that lies at the heart of the novel, and that, as an off-kilter, oddly skewed version of reproduction as we know it, plays with the conventions of birth and renders it monstrous indeed. Victor’s creation re-writes the birth process: it substitutes production for reproduction, rendering it one of “assembly” of existing body parts rather than an organic “generation.” It substitutes a single-parent, single-sex model for a mother-father pair. It substitutes extreme parental neglect for early child care, and stages the retributive anger of child toward parent for such oversight. It refuses the creature a (heterosexual) mate and thus rejects generational perpetuation.

When Mary Shelley began writing Frankenstein at the age of eighteen, she had a five-month-old son (William), was soon to be pregnant (with a baby to be named Clara), and, a year and a half earlier, had lost her first baby days after childbirth. Within the next three years, both her second and third children (William and Clara) would die, Frankenstein would be published, and Shelley would give birth to her last child (and only one to reach adulthood, Percy Florence). Frankenstein, birthed within an extraordinary sequence of pregnancy, childbirth, and child loss for